

What To Kill a Mockingbird can teach parents

By David G Allan

The novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a staple of American classrooms because of its inspiring and elegantly written lessons about justice, equality and civic duty. But long before your child brings this classic home, it should join the books on your bedside table because, at its core, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a parenting manual punctuated by moments of courtroom drama.

Atticus Finch, small town lawyer and widower, is arguably fiction's greatest father. Atticus parents his ten-year-old son Jem and his younger sister, Scout (6), with a calm and approachable demeanour. For a man in the 1930s American South, he is a progressive. He's against spanking, never yells, and gives his children truthful answers to difficult questions. Most importantly, for his parenting philosophy and the plot of the novel, Atticus models the behaviour he wants to see in his children.

There are many books on parenting these days, and as a father of two I have read enough to know that few are great, most are mediocre and some are plain awful. These parenting guides are based on the writer's personal experiences or the latest research, but none look to literature as a source of parental wisdom. Harper Lee's classic tale weaves five valuable lessons into a gripping narrative, making them both palatable and incredibly enjoyable.

Lesson 1: Live your values

Atticus lives by a code: let your conscience be your guide. That's why he takes on the case at the heart of the story, the defense of a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. Scout tells Atticus that most people in the town think it's wrong to defend the accused man. But

Atticus explains that “they’re entitled to full respect for their opinions. But before I can live with other folks I’ve got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience.” If he didn’t take the case, Atticus tells Scout, “I could never ask you to mind me again.”

Lesson 2: Listen to both sides of every story

Unsurprisingly for a lawyer, Atticus tries to look at any given situation from both sides. When Scout gets in trouble on her first day at school for already knowing how to read (thanks to Atticus), he suggest Scout look at it from the teacher’s point of view and how it could be disruptive to her lessons.

In a more serious moment, when Atticus is threatened by the father of the novel’s alleged rape victim, Bob Ewell, he doesn’t react, showing a degree of emotional resilience few of us could summon. Atticus later tells an outraged Jem, “See if you can stand in Bob Ewell’s shoes a minute. I destroyed his last shred of credibility at that trial, if he had any to begin with. The man had to have some kind of comeback, his kind always does... He had to take it out on somebody and I’d rather it be me than that houseful of children.”

My daughter can be angry at her teacher, her sister, a friend, my wife or me, sometimes many times a day. When she and I pause to discuss how the other person feels, as Atticus increasingly inspires me to do, we’re not only solving the problem, we are developing more empathy.

Lesson 3: Keep calm in a crisis

Perhaps most enviable in Atticus’s parenting (and hardest to achieve in reality) is the quality that the adult Scout describes as an “infinite capacity for calming turbulent seas”. There is almost nothing that ruffles Atticus’s feathers.

When Bob Ewell curses at him, threatens his life and spits in his face, Atticus’ only reaction is “I wish Bob Ewell wouldn’t chew tobacco.” A

rabid dog lumbers down their street and Atticus calmly but efficiently shoots it dead (to his children's amazement as he has never boasted about his marksmanship). Repeatedly in the novel Atticus reassures the children in such difficult moments that "it's not time to worry". And yet, an appropriate time to panic never seems to arrive.

Lesson 4: Have faith in your children

One of the most difficult dances of parenting is knowing when to give your children the right answers and when to trust their own ability to find them. Jem and Scout are at a good age to test these waters and Atticus seeks out opportunities for them to exercise their own judgment. He also trusts them with the truth. "When a child asks you something, answer him, for goodness' sake," Atticus tells his brother. "Children are children, but they can spot an evasion quicker than adults." When Scout asks him what "rape" means, Atticus gives her a dry but accurate legal definition and she is satisfied.

Lesson 5: You don't have to be tough to be brave

Atticus shows this in the smallest of ways, such as with the family's ornery old neighbour, Mrs Dubose, who makes a habit of taunting Jem and Scout when they walk by her house. "Just hold your head high and be a gentleman," Atticus advises Jem. "Whatever she says to you, it's your job not to let her make you mad." True to form, Atticus disarms Mrs Dubose with smiles and compliments, leading Scout to marvel, "it was times like these when I thought my father, who hated guns and had never been to any wars, was the bravest man who ever lived."

For me, Atticus Finch is that person. And though he is fictional, Harper Lee has acknowledged he was based on her own father, AC Lee. Outside the old courthouse in Monroeville, Alabama, where AC Lee practiced law, a plaque is inscribed to "Atticus Finch, a lawyer-hero who possesses the knowledge and experience of a man, strengthened by untainted insight of a child."

And there, at that intersection of those qualities is the simple, if difficult, beauty of the parenting philosophy of father-hero Atticus Finch: to bring the innocent goodwill of youth into the treacherous terrain of adulthood, to raise virtuous, courageous, resilient, fair and empowered children. Hopefully, they, in turn, will teach these virtues to their children too.

Source; <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140613-what-would-atticus-finch-do>